“A Sephardic Sojourn in the Caribbean”

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During the spring semester of 2011 I was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill in Barbados lecturing on Brazilian Culture and researching Caribbean film. The opportunity also allowed me to study a subject that has interested me since high school, the outcome of the Sephardim who left Portugal for the New World. In addition to Barbados, I wanted to visit the communities on two other islands, Curaçao and Jamaica, and see the famed sand floors of their synagogues. As a Portuguese scholar fascinated by the Judeo-Spanish tradition, I sought to find out if these languages were still used in the services or spoken by descendants of the early Sephardic settlers. Intrigued by the history of colonization, I asked myself which European power allowed the Sephardim the most freedom religiously and economically, and how that may have affected their situation today. Having grown up in the Midwest where intermarriage was common, I also wanted to see how the Caribbean Jewish communities addressed this issue. Ultimately, I wondered if the Sephardic experience on the islands offered a key to the overall survival of Jews in the Diaspora.

Though an Ashkenazi Jew by heritage, my interest in Sephardim stems from being a high school exchange student in São Paulo, Brazil. At the age of sixteen I went to live with a family in South America’s largest city. Their origin, however, was Recife, Pernambuco and I discovered later that they had chosen me because they thought they were descendants of Jews who had lived amongst the Dutch. They were excited to have me in their home and always treated me with respect, asking question about my faith though they had not practiced it for centuries.

After college, where I became fluent in Portuguese, I returned to Brazil and traveled to the Northeast where I visited the area known to have been the first Sephardic community in the Americas. At the

time, the synagogue on Rua Bom Jesus (Good Jesus Street) had not been restored, nor its mikvah excavated. Still, I was amazed at how the visit spurred in me the desire to trace the path of the Sephardim both to their source in Iberia and then to the New World.

My formal education intertwined perfectly with my project. As a graduate student doing a dissertation in Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin-Madison I earned my first Fulbright Scholarship to go to Portugal in 1994-95. Though my official research was on the Lusophone or Portuguese African Diaspora, during my time off I went around the country looking for signs of the Sephardic Diaspora. A regular at Shabbat morning services at the main synagogue in Lisbon, Shaarei-Tikvá, I became friends with a Scottish Jew who took me to Belmonte, one of the only villages that has practiced a form of Secret Judaism for over 500 years. I was amazed by its history, especially the importance of women in maintaining rituals within the home as synagogues were prohibited and men could not openly show their faith. I learned that the community had first been breached in the early twentieth century by a Russian miner who happened to be in the region and discovered that the Belmonte Jews considered themselves to be the only Jews left in the world. Only when he said the Shema did they believe that he, too, was a member of the faith. I wondered how the Belmonte community survived for so long under the harsh threat of the Inquisition. They lived in a very isolated region of Portugal, the Beira Alta or Upper Beira that was hard to reach. They pretended to eat the foods that non-Jews ate by making recipes using chicken instead of pork. The “alheira” or garlic sausage was one such delicacy eaten in the region. Most of all, they regulated the community through marriage. Sometimes people of the same family would marry—such as first cousins, though there may have been even closer connections such as uncles and nieces. As a result there were birth defects that I actually saw during my visit.

In addition to Belmonte and the synagogue in Lisbon I traveled to the Alentejo, Portugal’s southern breadbasket. There I visited places that no longer had a living presence but rather street signs such as “judaria” where the Jews were once forced to live. Overall, I found that few people in Portugal knew much about Jewish ritual or religion, rather that many who had names linked to flora and fauna may have been descendants of New Christian. After nearly a year living in Iberia I, too felt a little isolated as a Jew and looked forward to leaving.

I did not forget my experience searching for remnants of a Sephardic past in Portugal, and though I eventually earned my doctorate and moved to New York, my interest in learning more about their journeys continued. In the fall of 2010 I presented a paper in London on nineteenth century Sephardim of Great Britain, then two weeks later flew to Singapore to lecture on the Jews of India.

By the time I left Barbados to start my teaching and research, I was exhausted and looking forward to the opportunity of living in the tropics . Before arriving on the island I had learned that there were two synagogues, both Ashkenazi. On my first Friday night I went to a hotel and asked if they had any information on religious services. The concierge immediately put me in touch with Rose Altman, who at 88 was the oldest member of the Jewish community. She had all the information I needed regarding the synagogue and even more about the people who attended it. I learned that during the hot summer months people went to a house that was turned into a synagogue for practical reasons—it had air conditioning. In the winter some of the community, now numbering a few dozen families, and tourists many from cruise liners, go to the newly renovated Sephardic synagogue, Nidhe Israel or "the Scattered of Israel."

My first Kabbalat Shabbat service was memorable. I entered a thick gate and walked past two buildings, one I learned was a state-of-the-art museum dedicated to the history of the Sephardim and the importance of sugar cane, a crop brought over by the Jews of Recife. There was also a mikvah that actually has a spring fed well. I noticed two cemeteries, with neatly arranged gravestones lying horizontal on the ground. Looking closely I could see that the headstones had inscriptions in a variety of languages; Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew and English. Carved cupid figures and hands chopping down trees adorned some of them. When I saw people moving into the synagogue, I went in, too, looking for the women's section. After seeing men and women sitting together, I sat down on a wooden bench and admired the building. The interior was beautiful, with a grand reader's desk in the middle of the room with four pineapple shaped carvings symbolizing the tropics. There was a balcony, though it went unoccupied. An Israeli man in his mid-40s led the Conservative-style service and afterwards there was a small Oneg Shabbat in the back. A couple of women served cake and soda, greeting the members and guests.

Over time I got to know some of the Barbadian Jews, the pride they felt towards the synagogue as well as the difficulty they had maintaining the community. The structure was refurbished in 1987 on the site of a synagogue originally constructed in 1654 and rebuilt after it was destroyed by an 1831 hurricane. By the second decade of the twentieth century there were no longer Sephardim left on the island and the synagogue was closed, its religious articles sent to England in 1929. In the 1980s the post-colonial government wanted to use the property for a courthouse but Paul Altman, a descendant of the Polish Jews who had arrived on the island in the 1930s, led efforts to preserve and renovate it. Though the ancient artifacts were never returned from London, there are several Torahs in the Ark and the community is relieved that its future on the island is secure. The building has also become a major

tourist attraction bolstered by the Barbados National Trust that gives lectures on Sephardic history and leads tours around its grounds. Yet, those who actually attend services know that fewer and fewer members show up. Intermarriage is considered a major problem and over the years it has broken up a few families. As a result, children are often sent overseas to boarding schools, usually in England or Canada, with the hope that they will find a Jewish spouse. But it does not always work because those raised on the islands sometimes feel more of a kinship with non-Jews in the Caribbean Diaspora and end up marrying outside the faith to the dismay of their parents.

The second island I visited was Curaçao in the western Caribbean. I had just received an extension on my scholarship to attend a Caribbean Studies conference in Williamstad and it offered a wonderful opportunity to see the Sephardic synagogue there. Getting from Barbados to Curaçao in the Lesser Antilles islands was not easy and my "island hopping" by way of Trinidad took hours. But the trip was well worth it. Curaçao was so much different from the former British island I was living on. First of all, the climate was arid and instead of palm trees and green brush, there were cacti everywhere. The architecture of Williamstad, the capital, was colorful, lining an inlet crossed by a moveable pedestrian bridge.

I went to the Sephardic synagogue, Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel twice during my stay on the island. The first time I visited a museum that was in the courtyard of the synagogue. It proudly displays religious artifacts that had been used by the community through the centuries. There is also a memorial to George Maduro, a young man who went to Holland to help fight the Nazis in WWII and was killed in Dachau near the end of the war. Molds of gravestones saved from a large cemetery affected by the acid rain from a nearby oil refinery line the outside walls. They feature some of the same carvings as the headstones in Barbados though one had a hand with four fingers split reminiscent of a blessing by a Cohen. In addition to the permanent collection, there was a recent exhibition, "Keys to My Heritage", featuring keys that were saved by Sephardic Jews who fled the Inquisition.

A few days later I went back to the synagogue to attend Shabbat services. Walking into the stately synagogue, dating back to 1732, I was amazed by its mahogany interior, blue stained glass windows, and sand covered floor. I thought about the reasons given for the sand—to remind us of the years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert or the attempt to muffle the sounds of prayer in fear of the Inquisition. As in Barbados I looked around to see where I should sit and noticed that there were women seated alongside men. Joining them, I took a prayer book and began to follow along. Though the people around me spoke accented English and Dutch, the rabbi sounded as if he came from the United States and at one point during the Torah service read a prayer in broken Portuguese. I was

surprised to hear the language that I had studied since high school. After nearly four hundred years the Caribbean Sephardim did not forget the idiom spoken by their ancestors in Iberia. After the services there was a celebration for the children who had just finished another year of Hebrew School. Taking turns, each child, both girls and boys, climbed to the reader's desk and gave thanks to their teacher for another year of learning. I was impressed by the fact that there was a school catering to the next generation, though small in size.

Once the service was over, the congregation gathered in a community hall across the courtyard. There was a Kiddush and people talked to one another about the upcoming summer. I asked a few people some questions regarding the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and learned that it was a combined congregation of two synagogues that had split during the mid 1860s when the Reform Movement was sweeping Judaism in Germany and the United States. Decreasing membership led the two to join together in the 1960s using a combination of traditions from both. The Sephardic community went through another, more extreme change in 2000 when it became egalitarian allowing women to participate in services and sit alongside the men. Not all were in favor of this and some joined the Ashkenazi synagogue on Curaçao, Shaarei Tzedek.

My visit to Curaçao made me think of the difficult choices that Jews everywhere make to continue their traditions. Combining synagogues and deciding which prayers to keep or omit during a service was not easy. Nor was the decision to become egalitarian, a move that divided the community and is still an issue for discussion. Yet people still revere their heritage and invest in the next generation's education. One of the major concerns they have is intermarriage and a majority of children study abroad in the Netherlands, England or the United States. As in Barbados, this does not ensure that they will marry Jewish, but at least they will have a greater opportunity to do so given that the community numbers around 115 households or 350 members.

Once I returned to Barbados, the last trip I planned in my Sephardic Caribbean sojourn was Jamaica. Having received an invitation to visit the island from Ainsley Henriques, a leader of the Jamaican Jewish Community who I had met at a conference in New York, I decided to go in July. Jamaica, like Curaçao fascinated me because I had heard that it still had a Sephardic "essence" to it as opposed to Barbados that had become completely Ashkenazi aside from its synagogue building. Going to Shabbat services in Kingston, however, showed me how the traditions could evolve with the influence of different colonizers and peoples. For example the synagogue itself, Shaare Shalom, is a large, white colonial style building with sand floors. People of various ethnicities worshiped together in a style that to me was reminiscent of the British Protestants who once ruled the island combined with what Mr.

Henriques described as “Sephardic liturgy and music”. After services there was a Kiddush and I noticed that the attendees were somewhat older, though some were accompanied by grandchildren from abroad. As Mr. Henriques gave me a tour of the museum that also serves as a community center, I looked at photos of earlier community presidents from a different era. Now, only 200 Jews are affiliated with the United Congregation of Israelites though it is quite active for its size. There is a Hebrew School, Hillel Academy, as well as a home for the aged, synagogue sisterhood and B’nei B’rith. A new rabbi was hired in September 2011 and international groups help maintain the nearly 23 cemeteries around the island. The United Congregations of Israelites is also committed to educating both visitors from abroad and local Jamaicans about the Jamaican Jewish heritage. Each year hundreds of school children visit the center to learn about the important contributions made by Jews to the island country.

My time on the islands ended in August and since then I have thought a great deal about my visits to Barbados, Curaçao and Jamaica. I traced the remnants of the Sephardic communities from Portugal to Brazil to the islands imagining the difficulties they must have faced as they tried to survive. What I found was that there was something in common—something that Jews everywhere could learn from. First of all, numbers matter. A community will have a difficult time surviving if its members leave en masse or completely assimilate into a host nation. In the case of Barbados, the entire Sephardic population had disappeared by 1929 either through intermarriage or emigration to other countries such as Canada and Great Britain. Curaçao and Jamaica have both seen their young go abroad and not return or marry non-Jews. Secondly, rifts between synagogues need to be put aside in order to stabilize the population. In the case of Curaçao, decreasing numbers forced the communities of Mikvé Israel and Emanuel to join together after a century-long split, though the decision to have egalitarian worship prompted some members to leave the community once again. Jamaica also formed the United Congregations of Israelites. A third factor is the education of the young. Both Curaçao and Jamaica have Hebrew schools for their children and though they may leave when they reach high school or college age, their children will have a Jewish identity.

In conclusion, for Jewish communities to remain viable in the Diaspora, a minimum population committed to education and cohesiveness is essential, though outside factors such as politics and economics may ultimately affect the conduciveness of some locations.